

*Building a
Marriage
That Lasts*



JAMES C. DOBSON, PH.D.

BUILDING A MARRIAGE THAT LASTS

by James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

A number of years ago, Shirley and I took a vacation with our family and ended the trip in Washington, D.C. I had heard there was to be a special briefing on the family at the White House that day, and I decided at the last minute to attend. Because I was not on the guest list, it took me about 10 minutes longer to get through White House security, and I slipped into the briefing room just before the first speaker was announced. I sat down behind my good friend Leilani Watt, wife of then Secretary of the Interior James Watt.

Leilani greeted me and then said, "I don't think they've done you right." I said, "Why not? What do you mean?"

She said, "They didn't give you enough time."

"Time?" I replied. "Time for what?"

"Why, time to speak," she said. "Didn't you know you're on the program today?"

At that moment a White House aide tapped me on the shoulder and asked if he could usher me to the platform. Apparently, members of the staff who planned the briefing had known that I was likely to be there but had failed to tell me they were expecting me to speak! It was quite a shock to find myself looking at 200 expectant professionals who awaited my words of wisdom. I looked down and noticed that I had on brown socks and a blue suit. It had been a long vacation, and I wore the only clean thing left in my suitcase.

Who knows, and who cares, what I said to those men and women that day. Whether I captured their attention is doubtful, but the White House staff certainly grabbed mine! I went from half-asleep to supercharged in a period of four seconds. Fortunately for the audience, there were other speakers on the program that day, and one of them said some things I will never forget.

His name was Dr. Armand Nicholi, a psychiatrist at Harvard University Medical School and Massachusetts



General Hospital. He spoke on the subject of parenting, especially as it relates to the mental health of children. I wish every mother and father could have heard his remarks as he quoted the latest research on the consequences of divorce and family disintegration.

According to Dr. Nicholi, it is now known that emotional development in children is directly related to the presence of a warm, nurturing, sustained and continuous interaction with both parents. Anything that interferes with the vital relationship with either parent can have lasting consequences for the child. One landmark study revealed that 90 percent of the children from divorced homes suffered from an acute sense of shock when the separation occurred, including profound grieving and irrational fears. Fifty percent reported feeling rejected and abandoned, and indeed, half the fathers never came to see their children three years after the divorce. One-third of the boys and girls feared abandonment by the remaining parent with an intensity that researchers described as “overwhelming.” Most significantly, 37 percent of the children were even more unhappy and dissatisfied five years after the divorce than they had been at 18 months. In other words, *time did not heal their wounds.*

“Divorce is devastating, not just for the children but for their hurt and angry parents, too.”

In summary, Dr. Nicholi said divorce brings such intense loneliness to children that its pain is difficult to describe or even contemplate.

We all know that divorce has become the fashionable way to deal with marital conflict in the past three decades. Books such as *Creative Divorce* have described it as the start of a brand-new life that was in the “best interest” of the entire family. But that is patently untrue. Divorce is devastating, not just for the children but for their

hurt and angry parents, too. Women pay a particularly high price, even when they are the ones who opted out of the relationship.

Let me explain. There have always been irresponsible men who were unfaithful to their wives or abandoned their families. That is still going on and accounts for millions of broken homes today. But in my lifetime, marriages have begun to disintegrate for another reason. Women, encouraged by new freedoms and financial security, have shown a greater willingness to pull the plug. I have worked with many frustrated wives who seemed determined to obtain a divorce, not because their husbands were unfaithful or irresponsible, but because romantic love was missing from the relationship. These women expressed great anger and deep resentment

toward husbands who were either unwilling or unable to meet their wives' basic emotional needs.

I would not minimize the distressing “soul hunger” that women so frequently describe, but I will say this: Divorce is not the answer to it! Those who seek that “solution” often jump from the frying pan into the fire!

That is the point of the book entitled *Marriage: Grounds for Divorce*, written by Monte Vanton. The author was divorced by his wife and seemed quite bitter about the experience. Yet his analysis of marital breakup is insightful and provocative. Following are excerpts that convey his thesis. See if you agree with his perspective, keeping in mind that Vanton did not write from a Christian viewpoint.

The end of a marriage is like a little death, but to some married women, freedom looks like life after death. Young again, no one to tell her what to do, no more demands, criticisms. No more dinners to cook—no slavery! And, just outside, bright lights, gay conversation, lighthearted friends, flirtations and adventures. Palm Springs, Vegas, here I come!

A free spirit again! Oh, what a wonderful world it will be. No more arguments, complaints, no more asking for money. I'll have my own for evermore! Do you know a good attorney?

For the first few months, things do seem to improve. The cessation of hostilities is pleasant. Since the wife for years experienced an emotional tug-of-war in her mixed-up role as woman, wife and leader, the sudden severance brings temporary relief. But only temporary.

What is the chief preoccupation of our newly arrived divorcée? Career, children, home, travel, art, politics, friends. No, it's men! Where do these men come from? What are they like? What do they want? What have they been doing?

Hope is wonderful, but fantasy can be catastrophic! Many women, divorced or married and contemplating divorce, are sure that somewhere outside there is a man who will have all the virtues of her husband and none of his vices. From this starting point, divorcées start the great search.

It is obvious that the husband must have had some good points—hence the original marriage. The fact that the husband is a known quantity and the new man an unknown hazard, places him far ahead of the stranger. There is a good chance that another man may have similar or even more pronounced

defects, since he lives in the same culture with the same standards and values. Further, how can our gal judge clearly? How does she know she won't repeat the same mistake?

Her problem is further compounded. In her first marriage, she was trusting and open—now she is certain to be more cynical and guarded.

In the selection of a new mate, she must take into consideration the fact he may not want someone else's youngsters—can she be sure he will be good to them? And if indeed the new man is kind, there is always the chance the children may imperil their marital bliss by serving as a constant reminder they are not his own.

Where does this dream man come from?

Divorcées are usually between the ages of 28 and 39 at starting point.

There are basically two categories of men in this age group, the divorced and the never married. Our gal tries to avoid the latter. He spells trouble—a mother or a mother's memory lurking somewhere in the background. He's probably set in his ways, old-womanish or a happy seducer. Or—he's just not moved by women. In any event, the outlook is far from kosher. That leaves the man who has been married. Why did his wife divorce him? He might be as poor a bet as one's ex-husband.

Well, the field is narrowed to ages 35 to 40. We'll take a chance that he has been married before. What should he look like? Well, as long as we're changing husbands, he should be good-looking. Tall? Sure! Virile? Of course! Didn't we say that one of the troubles with our husbands was their indifference to sex? Actually, he should be a little like Cary Grant, have a nice speaking voice, be a good conversationalist, popular with men, romantic, decisive, tender, poetic, passionate, and above all, understanding. And he shouldn't have a mother!

He should have unlimited money and an interesting career—not a blouse manufacturer, or an auctioneer—a writer perhaps, or a lecturer, diplomat, or maybe just a millionaire. "After all, I want my kids to have the best. Why make a change if I don't improve myself? And he should love me completely and never make demands on me or be possessive. Nor should he ever criticize my housekeeping. He should never be tired, preoccupied or make an issue about money. He should take me away on weekends, and out to nice restaurants on Sunday morning for breakfast. We would travel a lot, and he should always be interested, completely interested in me!"

There are several million women, married, single and divorced looking for this hero—and he hasn't been found yet. But the girls keep hoping and looking.

The only place he exists is in a hit record, on a TV or movie screen or in one's imagination.

Forget the dreams of money, charm, career, manliness and decisiveness—and the chances of landing a skinny, broke, thin-haired, petulant, hollow-chested male are great.

The male has suddenly become King! All the gals are after him. His stock has leaped upwards; he never had it so good, and he's going to keep it coming. Marriage? That would end it all! He doesn't have to do anything. He's a male.

The chance of landing the ideal man is one in a million. Have you ever considered, ladies, the attitude of the eligible male? Marriage is the last thing he wants! Suddenly, the world has become his oyster and, after years of marriage, monotony and misery, his ego crushed, his manhood challenged, he's free and it's a man's world. Daily he is reminded by suppliant females that he's a hero! Why should he give that up! Besides, he's wily and experienced; he has learned the hard way.

He isn't going to be trapped by promises of home-cooked meals, a seductive figure and the prospect of heady nights beside the TV. Like an old salmon in a well-fished stream, he can smell the hook a mile away.

The ex-husband knows this moment of triumph all too quickly comes to an end once he says: "I do." He knows the law is slanted toward the female, and he knows there are thousands of attorneys all ready to aid the "little woman" once she decides to shed her husband and enjoy his substance. Why should he fall for that?

What does he want? It's really very simple. An occasional date, proper respect and then to bed—no strings. And when he takes you to bed he feels he's doing you a service! Oh, he's a hard man. Of course you don't have to go to bed with him. If he really digs you, he might wait three, maybe four dates, and then, no bed and he's gone. So you do go to bed; after all you're human and he's likable. From the moment of conquest he starts a rear guard action. Demonstrations of affection from you are regarded as warning signals, and he starts to pull away.

And so, life passes pleasantly for our male. He has his work, friends, apartment, vacations, ball games, and of course, his women, all loving, never demanding, never possessive, and all telling him what a wonderful lover he is. And then there are so many women out there he hasn't yet met. What an exciting prospect!

But you say, "He's a fool. He doesn't know what he's missing—a home, a family, a loving wife, permanence, security, building something together." But, he does know what he's missing. He had a home—worked hard to get it. His wife got that! He had a family, and loved his kids. His wife got those too. Permanence he never had—his wife's attorney shattered his hearth. Security—here today, gone tomorrow. The things he built with his wife, his wife and her attorney shared between them. Ms. Divorcée, you have paved the way for another woman's failure to catch a man, and another woman has facilitated your failure.

Men complain about unfair divorce laws, the flimsy excuses women use to obtain divorces, the distribution of the hard-worked-for assets, the alimony, and they say it's all one-sided. Your wife picks up the tab with your money when she takes her boyfriend out to dinner. And then some other husband pays the tab when his ex-wife takes you out. Things balance out.

To meet this shift in social standards and provide a place where lonely women might meet men, some bright girls started a club which has enjoyed some success. It's called "Parents Without Spouses." Because there are so few places where divorcées can meet men, "Parents Without Spouses" sponsors dances.

Divorcées eagerly anticipate these events, dress carefully and sally forth to the big adventure.

I have never seen the Chicago stockyards—but I have seen these dances! They are frightening and desperate like a slave auction! The allure of the female fades as hordes of them smile, gesture, pose and parade. Strong men blanch at the prospect.

The market is reversed and the man is desperately hunted, but he doesn't want to be chased—he wants to do the chasing! There is something frightening about being chased by a female, and being chased by a thousand is positively terrifying.

There was once a movie called The Gay Divorcée. A charming, beautiful, divorced woman was depicted floating from one deliriously exciting adventure to another. Admired, flattered by an army of doting males, envied by her poor married sisters, she became a sort of symbol for American womanhood. She longed for, hoped for state of freedom. But this was a movie, it was fiction and fantasy, yet our Cinderella mentality still continues. Most divorcées sit at home at night and when the phone rings it is a reprieve. Parents are really no help; they only remind you you're getting older and lonelier.

Married friends feel a little uncomfortable with you, on guard lest you think them patronizing. They eventually disappear. You got the kids, and you got the responsibilities. Double. Other divorced women speak your language but you hate it! On vacations word gets around that you're a divorcée and immediately ideas are formed about you. Married women think you are loose and dangerous—and cluck protectively around their husbands. Men are amazed if you don't go to bed with them on the first date. You've lost your citizenship, your status! You have freedom—you stay home. Night after night as the hours tick away, loneliness is increased by fear. Self-confidence begins to ooze away, and in that quiet apartment a ghost enters and takes you by the hand. You wonder if you've forgotten how to talk, how to be witty. You begin to feel unattractive, despised.

Given enough time in that room, whatever ugly mental self-image you have concealed all these years gradually emerges and takes over. So you rush to the telephone and start calling. Striving to keep a cheerful note in your voice, and having nothing new to say, you ask, "What's new?" When women friends' numbers give out, you apprehensively dial some men friends, hoping they are not entertaining other females. Trying to sound casual, and praying anxiety won't show, you chattily ask: "What's new? I haven't heard from you in some time. Been out of town? Yes, we must get together sometime." Maybe I should have gone to bed with him last time—he sounded a little cold.

A date brings relief, but the loneliness of yesterday is the herald of tomorrow's fears.

Millions of women know this. Yet today there are thousands of women about to tell their husbands they have decided to get a divorce, and tomorrow there will be thousands more.

When birth control became generally accepted, intelligent women quickly availed themselves of this simple technique. The need warranted the use.

*Is there not as great a need for divorce control? Why is one precaution so important, and the other nonexistent?**

Whether or not you agree with Vanton's distressing analysis (I think he's dead right about female disillusionment, but he understates seriously the pain experienced by men), my advice to young couples stands unchallenged: Don't permit the *possibility* of divorce to enter your thinking. Even in moments of great conflict and discouragement, divorce is no solution. It merely substitutes a new set of miseries for the ones left behind. Guard your relationship against erosion as though you were defending your very lives. Yes, you can make it together. Not only can you survive, but you can keep your love alive if you give it priority in your system of values.

The Marriage Killers

It is true, of course, that the society in which we live actively mitigates against marital stability. There are dangers on all sides, and we must defend ourselves with all our energies. In fact, I think it would be healthy at this point to name the great marriage killers. Any one of the following evils can rip your relationship to shreds if given a place in your lives. Here is a list of them and comments for a few:

1. Overcommitment and physical exhaustion. Beware of this danger. It is especially insidious for young couples who are trying to get started in a profession or in school. Do not try to go to college, work full-time, have a baby, manage a toddler, fix up a house and start a business at the same time. It sounds ridiculous, but many young couples do just that and are surprised when their marriage falls apart. Why wouldn't it? The only time they see each other is when they are worn out! It is especially dangerous to have the husband vastly overcommitted and the wife staying home with a preschooler. Her profound loneliness builds discontent and depression, and we all know where that leads. You must reserve time for one another if you want to keep your love alive.

2. Excessive credit and conflict over how money will be spent. We've said it before: Pay cash for consumable items or don't buy. Don't spend more for a house or car than you can afford, leaving too few resources for dating, short trips, baby sitters and so on. Allocate your funds with the wisdom of Solomon.

3. Selfishness. There are two kinds of people



in the world, the givers and the takers. A marriage between two givers can be a beautiful thing. Friction is the order of the day, however, for a giver and a taker. But two takers can claw each other to pieces within a period of six weeks. In short, selfishness will devastate a marriage every time.

4. *Interference from in-laws.* If husbands or wives have not been fully emancipated from their parents, it is best not to live near them. Autonomy is difficult for some mothers (and fathers) to grant, and close proximity is built for trouble.

5. *Unrealistic expectations.* Some couples come into marriage anticipating rose-covered cottages, walks down primrose lanes, and uninterrupted joy. Counselor Jean Lush believed, and I agree, that this romantic illusion is particularly characteristic of American women who expect more from their husbands than they are capable of delivering. The consequent disappointment is an emotional trap. Bring your expectations in line with reality.

6. *Space invaders.* This killer will be difficult to describe or understand in such a brief context, but I'll try. By space invaders, I am not referring to aliens from Mars. Rather, my concern is for those who violate the breathing room needed by their partners, quickly suffocating them and destroying the attraction between them. Jealousy is one way this phenomenon manifests itself. Another is low self-esteem which leads the insecure spouse to trample the territory of the other. Love must be free and it must be confident. (If more information is needed, read my book *Love Must Be Tough*.)

7. *Alcohol or substance abuse.* These are killers, not only of marriages but of people. Avoid them like the plague.

8. *Pornography, gambling and other addictions.*

It should be obvious to everyone that the human personality is flawed. It has a tendency to get hooked on destructive behaviors, especially early in life. During an introductory stage, people think they can play with enticements such as pornography or gambling and not get hurt. In actuality few walk away unaffected. For some, there is a weakness and vulnerability that is not known until too late. Then they become addicted to something that tears at the fabric of the family. This warning may seem foolish and even prudish to my readers, but I've made a 20-year study of those who wreck



their lives. Their problems often begin in experimentation with a known evil and ultimately end in death . . . or the death of a marriage.

9. Sexual frustration, loneliness, low self-esteem and the greener grass of infidelity. A deadly combination!

10. Business failure. It does bad things, to men especially. Their agitation over financial reverses sometimes sublimates to anger within the family.

11. Business success. It is almost as risky to succeed wildly as it is to fail miserably in business. The writer of the Proverbs said, "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread" (30:8). Edward Fitzgerald said it another way: "One of the saddest pages kept by the recording angel is the record of souls that have been damned by success." It's true. Those who profit handsomely sometimes become drunk with power and the lust for more! Wives and children are forgotten in this process.

12. Getting married too young. Girls who marry between 14 and 17 years of age are more than twice as likely to divorce as those who marry at 18 or 19 years of age. Those who marry at 18 or 19 are one and a half times as likely to divorce as those who marry in their 20s. The pressures of adolescence and the stress of early married life do not mix well. Finish the first before taking on the second.

These are the bloody marriage killers I've seen most often. But in truth, the list is virtually limitless. All that is needed to grow the most vigorous weeds is a small crack in your sidewalk. If you are going to beat the odds and maintain an intimate, long-term marriage, you must take the task seriously. The natural order of things will carry you away from one another, not bring you together.

"The natural order of things will carry you away from one another, not bring you together."

Let me put in another way. Not far from where I was born, the mighty Mississippi winds its way through the countryside. It is a beautiful river but has a will of its own. Approximately 70 miles from Baton Rouge, La., the government has fought a tremendous battle to keep this powerful river from changing its course to a shorter and steeper descent to the Gulf of Mexico. If the Mississippi were to have its way, the results would be catastrophic for cities and farms on the downward side. The entire topography of southern Louisiana would change. The port cities of New Orleans and Baton Rouge would lose their waterfront and their way of life. A town called Morgan City

would be flooded into oblivion. Engineers estimate that billions of dollars of property would be destroyed if this battle were lost.

In some ways, the battle to save the family is like that. Without considerable effort and expenditure of resources, the banks will overflow and the landscape will be ruined. That's the world in which we live. Only one or two marriages in 10 will generate the intimacy so desperately sought.

How will you beat the odds? How will you build a solid relationship that will last until death takes you across the great divide? How will you include yourselves among that dwindling number of older couples who have garnered a lifetime of happy memories and experiences? Even after 50 or 60 years, they still look to one another for encouragement and understanding. Their children have grown up in a stable and loving environment and have no ugly scars or bitter memories to erase. Their grandchildren need not be told, delicately, why "Nana and Papa don't live together anymore." Only love prevails. That is the way God intended it to be, and it is still possible for you to achieve. But there is no time to lose. Reinforce the riverbanks. Brace up the bulwarks. Bring in the dredges and deepen the bed. Keep the powerful currents in their proper channels. Only that measure of determination will preserve the love with which you began, and there is very little in life that competes with that priority. If you don't agree, read this article again. You missed something vital.

Now let's take a brief look at the three elements (or fundamentals) of a solid Christian marriage.

Fundamentals of a Christian Marriage

In an effort to draw on the experiences of those who have lived together successfully as husbands and wives, we asked married couples to participate in an informal study. More than 600 people agreed to speak candidly to the younger generation about the concepts and methods that have worked in their homes. They each wrote comments and recommendations which were carefully analyzed and compared. The advice they offered is not new, but it certainly represents a great place to begin. In attempting to learn any task, one should start with the fundamentals—those initial steps from which everything else will later develop. In this spirit, our panel of 600 offered three tried and tested, back-to-basics recommendations with which no committed Christian would likely disagree.

1. A Christ-centered home. The panel first suggested that newlyweds should establish and maintain a *Christ-centered home*. Everything rests

on that foundation. If a young husband and wife are deeply committed to Jesus Christ, they enjoy enormous advantages over a family with no spiritual dimension.

A meaningful prayer life is essential in maintaining a Christ-centered home. Of course, some people use prayer the way they follow their horoscopes, attempting to manipulate an unidentified “higher power” around them. One of my friends teasingly admits that he utters a prayer each morning on the way to work when he passes the donut shop. He knows it is unhealthy to eat the greasy pastries, but he loves them dearly. Therefore, he asks the Lord for permission to indulge himself each day.

He'll say, “If it is Your will that I have a donut this morning, let there be a parking space available somewhere as I circle the block.” If no spot can be found for his car, he circles the block and prays again.

Shirley and I have taken our prayer life a bit more seriously. In fact, this communication between man and God has been *the* stabilizing factor throughout our 40-plus years of married life. In good times, in hard times, in moments of anxiety and in periods of praise, we have shared this wonderful privilege of talking directly to our heavenly Father. What a concept. No appointment is needed to enter into His presence. We don't have to go through His subordinates or bribe His secretaries. He is simply there, whenever we bow before Him. Some of the highlights of my life have occurred in these quiet sessions with the Lord.



2. Committed love. The second suggestion made by our panel of 600 “experts” represented yet another back-to-basics concept. It focused on committed love that is braced against the inevitable storms of life. There are very few certainties that touch us all in this mortal existence, but one of the absolutes is that we will experience hardship and stress at some point. Nobody remains unscathed. Life will test each of us severely, if not during younger days, then through the events surrounding our final days.

Jesus spoke of this inevitability when He said to His disciples, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

In stressing the importance of committed love, however, the panel of 600 was referring not only to the great tragedies of life but also to the daily

frustrations that wear and tear on a relationship. These minor irritants, when accumulated over time, may even be more threatening to a marriage than the catastrophic events that crash into our lives. And yes, Virginia, there are times in every good marriage when a husband and wife don't like each other very much. There are occasions when they feel as though they will never love their partners again. Emotions are like that. They flatten out occasionally like an automobile tire with a nail in the tread. Riding on the rim is a pretty bumpy experience for everyone on board.

3. Communication. The third recommendation by our panel of 600 represents another basic ingredient in good marriages. Like the other two, it begins with the letter "C" and focuses on good communication between husbands and wives.

The solution to communicative problems that arise at home involves compromise. A man has a clear responsibility to "cheer up his wife which he hath taken" (Deuteronomy 24:5). He must not claim himself "a rock" who will never allow himself to be vulnerable again. He must press himself to open his heart and share his deeper feelings with his wife. Time must be reserved for meaningful conversations. Taking walks and going out to breakfast and riding bicycles on Saturday mornings are conversation inducers that keep love alive. Communication can occur even in families where the husband leans inward and the wife leans outward. In these instances, I believe, the primary responsibility for compromise lies with the husband.

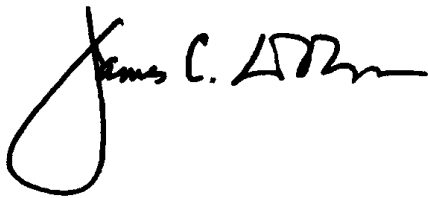
On the other hand, women must understand and accept the fact that some men cannot be what they want them to be. I have previously addressed this need for wives to accept reality as it is presented to them in *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women*.



Some of the women reading this article are married to men who will never be able to understand feminine needs. Their emotional structure makes it impossible for them to comprehend the feelings and frustrations of another—particularly those occurring in the opposite sex. These men will not read an article like this and would probably resent it if they did. They have never been required to "give" and have no idea how it is done.

What, then, is to be the reaction of their wives? What would you do if your husband lacked the insight to be what you need him to be?

My advice is that you change that which can be altered, explain that which can be understood, teach that which can be learned, revise that which can be improved, resolve that which can be settled, and negotiate that which is open to compromise. Create the best marriage possible from the raw materials brought by two imperfect human beings with two distinctly unique personalities. But for all the rough edges that can never be smoothed and the faults that can never be eradicated, try to develop the best possible perspective and determine in your mind to accept reality as it is.





*Dr. and Mrs. Dobson
celebrating their 50th anniversary, August, 2010*

**Monte Vanton, Marriage: Grounds for Divorce (New York: Victoria Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 1977). Used with permission.*

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